

## WHY WRITING REPORTS IS HARD—AND HOW TO MAKE IT EASIER

I've yet to meet a person who says they *enjoy* writing reports (though I'm sure there are a few out there). Even great writers prefer to have written, but don't enjoy the actual process of writing.

Being able to write as part of the job is expected. But few people have been trained as writers or consider themselves to be writers. The truth is—writing is difficult intellectual work.

Here are some tips to make the next report you write a little less irksome.

### 1. Get the parameters early

As soon as you know you'll be writing a report, find out what the specifications are. What's the scope? When is it due? What particular challenges are involved?

Don't be tempted to put the whole issue aside because you want to avoid having to think about it.

This 'discovery phase' is an important step because it allows your subconscious mind to work on the problem ahead of time—before you even put fingers on the keyboard.

### 2. Gather your material

No, you are not writing yet. You're talking to people, finding articles on the topic, reading similar reports, and doing your basic research. Make sure you leave sufficient time for this data gathering stage. During this phase, you're doing a minimal sorting process: filtering out the irrelevant, looking for key factors, thinking through your major topic areas.

### 3. Now do a data dump

This could be just downloading all your research into a document. You should find, though, that by now, you're also starting to have original ideas on the topic. Get those ideas down.

Do not edit at this stage. It's the raw material that you will sort out and refine later. You should work fast and hard. Get those ideas down. Don't worry about mistakes, doubling up, intricacies of grammar, spelling, or usage. Depending on the document, it could take a few hours or days.

#### 4. Sort your material into some sort of shape

Organise it into 'chunks' that logically go together. Give those chunks meaningful headings. Instead of *Safety*, use a more meaningful heading such as *Safety Breaches in the XYZ Facility*.

You should also be applying your critical thinking skills to judge what information is relevant, and what can be deleted.

#### 5. Now edit, rewrite, refine

Here's the truth that writers know and non-writers don't: *all writing is rewriting*. But you've done the hard work. Now you're just refining and polishing.

#### 6. Final review

Have you included everything? Are you on target with the objective of the report? Do you need more data? Set it aside and see the document with fresh eyes.

Go through the document and check for grammar, spelling, punctuation, data, errors in style (such as redundancy). Most writers need a reference guide for such matters, and the definitive work in Australia is the *Style Manual for authors, editors and printers* (Wiley & Sons).

Voila! There you have it. Done and dusted. You've finished that report. Now get back to work!